

ISLAM AS AN IDEAL MODERN SOCIAL SYSTEM **(A Study of Ali Shariati's Thought)**

Abstract

This article reexamines Ali Shariati's thought in formatting Islamic social order. The discussion is important in lighting discourses on Islamic society which is now being evaporated but has new challenges in new circumstances and time of the Muslim community. By taking the texts translated from Shariati's books and articles this study describes and analyzes the format of Shariati's thought, what are being rejected by him, and what is the formulation being proposed by him in order to develop Islamic community. Finally, it also contextualizes Shariati's thought with what being happened in its time in direction to project to our time.

Keywords: *Shariati, Islamic Thought, Islamic Resurgence.*

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A. Introduction

The coming back of the West to be politically involved in Muslim regions such as Tunisia, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan has made the pillars of the civil establishment in such Muslim countries shaken. It remains us of the emergences of freedom movements in the early modern time in the Muslim countries which had achieved their freedom life out of the Western occupation.

At that time Muslim intellectuals dig their reference to Islam concerning the statecraft. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Muhammad Iqbal, and Muhammad Asad were the pioneers of this intellectual movement. Followed by Sayyid Qutb and Abu al-'Ala al-Maududi, and Ali Shariati among others, this enterprise was strengthened. To this, reopening our intellectual storage of the reconstruction of Islamic order in the modern world is extremely needed today, that is, the time of restructuring Islam as the ideology of the Muslim community (*ummah*). In this case, referring back to Shariati as a leader of

intellectual movement calling for going back to Islam in the 20th century in the Iranian context could be a relevant thing to study.

B. Shariati in Modern Iran

In modern Iran, Shariati is acknowledged as one who brought young generation to Islam.¹ Next to Khomeini, Shariati was the most influential figure in Islamic movement carrying Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979.² He was even called as the initial ideologue.³

Ali Shariati (1933-1977) was born in Mashad, Iran, from a modern preacher family. He studied in Mashad and Paris, where he got titles of B.A., M.A., and doctorate in the fields of Persian literature, sociology, and history of religions. He was the founder of The Liberation Movement of Iran Abroad and the main figure of Husayniyah Irshad Institute in Tehran. He was jailed by Shah's regime in 1970s and, then, he moved to London where he passed away mysteriously with a perception that there was Shah's secret police (SAVAK)'s involvement. Among his writings translated and studied throughout the Muslim world are *What Is To Be Done?*, *On the Sociology of Islam*, *Man and Islam*, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, *The History of*

Religions, *Existentialism*, and *Martyrdom*.⁴

Shariati was a modern Muslim thinker. He uttered his own conviction about Islam in modern terms for the modern audience. And he had his own heroes. The Muslim modernists being modeled by Shariati are Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), the influential ideologue of anti Western imperialism; Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), the force behind the religious reformist movement of Egypt in the early 20th century; and Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), the great reformer of Indian Muslims standing for activism and creative self-realization.⁵

C. Method of Thought

To know closer on what Shariati persuaded at his time we should identify, firstly his way of thought. There are some characteristics in Shariati's method of thinking: Islamic humanism, class struggle, dialectical, radical, and wise (*hikmah*).

Shariati has an idea of Islamic humanism. Here, Islam should speak of mankind as a God's creature living in order to develop civilization. He says that "it was therefore necessary that religion should speak in images and symbols that would become comprehensible with the development of human thought and science."⁶

¹ Bazargan and Ayatullah Mutahhari mentioned it in their letter read after the death of Shariati. Chehabi, H. E., *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran Under the Shah and Khomeini*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1990, p. 70.

² *Ibid.*, 187.

³ Ayubi, Nazih, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 147 quoting Abrahamian, 1988, 289-97.

⁴ Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period*, Albany, New York: 1980, pp. 144-7.

⁵ Akhavi, *op. cit.*, 146 quoting Shariati, *Chih Bayad Kard? (What is to be Done?)*, (Tehran: Husayniyah Irshad, n.d.), pp. 32-42.

⁶ Shariati, Ali, *On the Sociology of Islam*, tr. by Hamid Algar, Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979, p. 72.

A dyadic view of society is also Shariati's method of thinking. His view is social, historical and class struggle.⁷ For instance, he characterizes class struggle as human destiny and human history, which can be symbolized in Cain (Qabil) and Abel (Habil). Cain represents agriculturist and all exploiting class in general, and Abel stands for "primitive communism" of pastoralist and all exploited class in general. As he says,

The story of Cain and Abel depicts the first day in the life of the sons of Adam on this earth...as being identical with the beginning of contradiction, conflict and ultimately warfare and fratricide. This confirms the scientific fact that life, society and history are based on contradiction and struggle, and that contrary to the belief of the idealists, the fundamental factors in all three are economics and sexuality, which come to predominate over religious faith, brotherly ties, truth and morality.⁸

Shariati's social thought and his theories are dialectical. He says that the structure [*matn*] of society consists in a dialectical contradiction. And that "this factor of contradiction and struggle between thesis and antithesis implies society to movement and draws it to revolution and moves it forward, frees it and, ultimately, enters it into a new

stage."⁹ Shariati admits his dialectics as "a comparison in the differences between the truth and the reality of the faith."¹⁰ Conflict between Cain and Abel will always exist in society. However, in the end, Abel will win. It is explained by the *intizar* (waiting for the messiah), as the synthesis.¹¹

In his theological thought, Shariati tends to interpret Islam in liberal-radical style.¹² Everyone can interpret Islamic texts. And he has the reason: some of the commentators of the Qur'an are Cain's descendants. So, in order to avoid it, we "should read the text itself and comprehend what it says because it is the only document which has been saved from their embezzlement."¹³

Finally, Shariati believes that the true thought is not only based on knowledge, but more importantly based on consciousness (*hikmah*). As he says, "*hikmah* is the type of knowledge or acute insight that was brought to mankind by prophets and

⁹ Shariati, *Az Kuja Aghaz Kunim?*, p. 38 as quoted by Akhavi, *op. cit.*, 152.

¹⁰ Shariati, Ali, *The Hajj*, tr. by Ali A. Behzadnia and Najla Denny, (1977), Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2003, p. xi.

¹¹ "Our faith is true, is just, is redeeming. Our Book, our Prophet, our Way, the best.... But Reality shows the opposite: the people of Truth are defeated.... *Intizar* solves this discrepancy. By expecting the final triumph of Truth over Reality." *Intizar*, 36-8 as quoted by Bayat-Philipp, Mangol, "Shi'ism in Contemporary Iranian Politics: The Case of Ali Shari'ati" in Kedourie, Elie and Haim, Sylvia G. (eds.), *Towards A Modern Iran: Studies in Thought, Politics and Society*, London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1980, p. 162.

¹² Ayubi, *op. cit.*, 60 quoting Bezirgan, 1979.

¹³ *The Hajj*, 158-9.

⁷ Akhavi, *op. cit.*, 152 quoting Shariati, *Intizar-i Madhhab-i I'tiraz* (Tehran: Husayniyah Irshad, 1971), p. 25.

⁸ *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 104.

not by scientists or philosophers. This is the type of knowledge and self-consciousness that Islam talks about. It not only trains scientists, but conscious and responsible intellectuals.”¹⁴ And the conscious one is called as the *Raushanfikir* (the torchbearer, the scout).¹⁵

D. Opposition

Before proposing his own thinking about social order, Shariati was doing denial first. The things to be denied by him are: polytheism, destructive Europe, blind-democracy, and quiet-*ulama* (religious scholars).

Shariati refuses all kinds of polytheism whether it is old or new; in a form of thought, feeling, action, or culture. Here is his statement, as addressed to the common Muslims:

Your enemy is not always armed or an army. It is not necessarily a known outsider. It may be a system or a feeling, a thought or a possession, a way of life or a type of work, a way of thinking or a working tool, a type of production or a way of consumption, culture, colonisation, religious brainwashing, exploitation, a social relation or propaganda. It can be neo-colonialism, bureaucracy, technocracy or automation. At times it is exhibitionism, nationalism and racism while other times it is Nazi-fascism, bourgeoisism and militarism. It may be love for joy (Epicureanism), love for ideas (idealism), love for matter (materialism), love for

art and beauty (romanticism), love for nothing (existentialism), love for land and blood (racism), love for heroes and central government (fascism), love for individuals (individualism), love for all (socialism), love for economy (communism), love for wisdom (philosophy), love for feeling (gnosticism), love for heaven (spiritualism), love for existence (realism), love for history (fatalism), love for God’s will (determinism), love for sex (freudism), love for instincts (biologism), love for the hereafter (faith), superstitiousness of idealism, gluttony of economics ... These are the idols of the new polytheism. The new civilization is like Lat, ‘Uzza, Asaf and Na’ilah of the new Quraysh!¹⁶

Shariati blatantly refuses Europe with its destructive behavior, for it “always speaks of humanity, but destroys human beings wherever it finds them.”¹⁷ Comprehensively, he describes Europe as a structure of Cainian system: kings, riches, and clergy¹⁸ supporting each other in order to rule the world.¹⁹

¹⁶ *The Hajj*, 166-7.

¹⁷ *On the Sociology of Islam*, 17.

¹⁸ In Shariati’s simplification: “In Europe, the scientific revolution overcame the church. Science took the place of religion. The old theological schools were transformed into modern universities. The spiritual people were expelled to the corner of the temples by the scientists; Balam left the church and appeared at the university. The French Revolution eradicated feudalism but Korah who was defeated in his village rushed to the city

¹⁴ *The Hajj*, 75.

¹⁵ In other words he is “the antithesis of oppression and darkness, ... for he is light”. *Az Kuja*, 10-11 and 38 as quoted by Bayat-Philipp, *op. cit.*, 158.

Shariati also denies blind-democracy. He says that democracy is good for a society which should be administered, but it is totally dysfunctional for societies which should be reformed and changed.²⁰ He also mentions that even in industrial countries, democracy is not in line with its ideals, but becomes the play of the capitalists.²¹ In Islamic history, the principles of *bay'ah* (public allegiance) and *shura* (free election), did not appropriately work because the hereditary system had forced its power, so that *bay'ah* only meant "support and submission".²² It is here,

and established a bank! Although Pharaoh was beheaded by the blade of a guillotine and buried in the palace of Versailles by a democratic rule, he was resurrected and supported by Korah's money and Balam's magic! DeGaulle came to power." With an additional note that DeGaulle is "The French president who earned his reputation under the pretense of liberalism and democracy. In reality, he supported French colonialism." *The Hajj*, 156 n. 14.

¹⁹ "If you defeat one by seizing his arm, the second one will try to buy you with his money; if this fails, the third one will cheat you in the name of faith. If none of these methods succeed, they will try to achieve their ends by using science, art, philosophy or ideology. And, if one of these are effective, they will resort to mourning, crying, begging, praying or simply keeping your mind occupied so that you will not realise what is happening...." *The Hajj*, 156-7.

²⁰ Chehabi, *op. cit.*, 71 quoting Shariati, *Emmat va emamat* (The umma and imamhood), 1977, pp. 161-2.

²¹ Chehabi, *op. cit.*, 71-2.

²² Shariati, Ali, "Shahadat," in Gary Legenhausen and Mehdi Abedi (eds.), *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, Houston, Texas: IRIS (The

then, he proposes an 'engagé democracy', led by qualified group of revolutionary-progressive people the aim of which is to realize the ideology.²³

To the structure of Muslim society itself, Shariati negates quiet-'ulama'. According to Shariati, most of the religious scholars ('ulama') in Iran in his time were the representatives of the Safawi Shi'ism, characterized as their quiet-cooperation with the despotic regime of Shah.²⁴

E. Ideal Islam

Having negated the existing social life, Shariati, affirms the ideal social life of Islam, which can be characterized as: *tawhid*, ideological Islam, median school, *imam* as the leader, harmonious society, people's independency, *ummah* (Muslim community) as the ideal society, and ancient Medina as a model for an Islamic state.

For Shariati, this life should be based on *tawhid*. And this *tawhid* is universal, addressed to all races, nations, groups, families and social classes.²⁵ As the world-view, this *tawhid* brings humanity into one power, impels humans "to revolt against all lying powers, all the humiliating fetters of fear and of greed."²⁶ Here we can see that for Shariati, *tawhid* is a gigantic energy for the revolution, something which is very rare to hear from other Muslim writers. And Shariati also guarantees that besides upholding equality between humans, *tawhid* also means

Institute for Research and Islamic Studies), 1986, p. 203.

²³ Bayat-Philipp, *op. cit.*, 163.

²⁴ Chehabi, *op. cit.*, 205.

²⁵ "Shahadat", 157.

²⁶ *On the Sociology of Islam*, 87.

that there is no conflict in society. As he says,

“...the very structure of *tawhid* cannot accept contradiction or disharmony in the world. According to the world-view of *tawhid*, therefore, there is no contradiction in all of existence: no contradiction between man and nature, spirit and body, this world and the hereafter, matter and meaning. Nor can *tawhid* accept legal, class, social, political, racial, national, territorial, genetic or even economic contradictions, for it implies a mode of looking upon all being as a unity.”²⁷

To Shariati, Islam is not only a religion, it is also an ideology. According to Arjomand, the meaning of “ideology” in Shariati’s works corresponds with Durkheim’s “collective consciousness”.²⁸ So, this Islamic collective consciousness can answer all human problems.²⁹ And that because Islam at Shariati time was an oppressed religion, he affirms that Islam “suggests the negation of aristocracy, class antagonism, and exploitation of labor by money, with a super-structure of the *imamate*

[leadership], which suggests the negation of despotism, of individual rule, of aristocracy, of oligarchy, and of the dictatorship of an individual family, class, or race.”³⁰

Shariati also states that Islam is a median school. To compare with the West, Islam is a median school between the Communism and Capitalism. It combines the good of the two schools but has no inadequacies of both.³¹

But the good of Islam cannot be existed without an ideal leader, the *Imam* (the religious leader). Here Shariati confirms that apart from a prophet, Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) was an *Imam*.³² Therefore, for Islamic society, the ideal leader is an *Imam*, the inner quality of which is different from the mass, and one who leads them not only to “maximize their happiness” as believed by Western utilitarianists, but more to reform and improve the mind. It is the duty of the *Imam* to guide the people from “what they are” to “what they should be”.³³ But Shariati mentions that the *Imamah* is a system of meritocracy, not merely hereditary.³⁴

Shariati also believes that history is ended in a harmonious society. To him, Shi’ism perceives that the movement of the history is going

²⁷ *On the Sociology of Islam*, 86.

²⁸ Said Amir Arjomand, “A la reserche de la conscience collective: Durkheim’s Ideological Impact in Turkey and Iran,” *American Sociologist* 17 (1982), 98 as quoted by Chehabi, *op. cit.*, 70.

²⁹ “Islam and its role in man’s social progress, self-consciousness, movement, responsibility, human ambition and struggle for justice; Islam’s realism and naturalness, creativity, adaptability with scientific and economic progress and orientation toward civilization and the community.” *The Hajj*, xi.

³⁰ “Shahadat”, 201-2.

³¹ Chehabi mentions this based on Shariati’s first book, *Maktab-e vaseteh* (The median school) (1955). Chehabi, *op. cit.*, 188.

³² “Shahadat”, 202.

³³ Chehabi, *op. cit.*, 72 quoting Shariati, *Emmat va emamat* (The umma and imamhood), 1977, pp. 62-3.

³⁴ Shariati, Ali, *Man and Islam*, tr. by Dr. Fatollah Marjani, Houston, Texas: Free Islamic Lit., Inc., 1981, p. 90.

to a peaceful, free of conflict society.³⁵ For Shi'ism has a concept of *intizar* (waiting for the messiah). But this concept of waiting should be positive, action-oriented, and voluntary. It should not be passive, lazy, and fatalistic.³⁶

As an ideologue, Shariati urges the people to be independent. For him, to be an ideal society, Muslims should be independent materially and spiritually. As he says, "it is impossible to achieve economic independence without having achieved spiritual independence, and vice versa. These two are interdependent as well as complementary conditions."³⁷

Ummah (Muslim community) is the ideal society, for Shariati. But this community, led by the *Imam*, should apply the divine plan on earth.

³⁵ "Because [there will come] the world revolution, the human salvation, the establishment of justice, peace, and equality –all these—yes; but [more important] the title of the last savior of man in this relationship of *thar* [blood] and *thar* avenging, which comprises the whole of human history, is *Muntaqim* (the Avenger) [the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi]." Shariati, Ali, "Thar," in Gary Legenhausen and Mehdi Abedi (eds.), *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, Houston, Texas: IRIS (The Institute for Research and Islamic Studies), 1986, p. 260 n. 13.

³⁶ "one who is waiting for the return of the *Imam* is one who is prepared; so that at any moment it is possible for the trumpet to sound, and he will see himself responsible in participating in this divine law; and he is automatically ready, both engaging himself and equipped, every *Shi'i* steps forward with the hope of hearing the call of the *Imam*. Shariati, *Intizar*, p. 42 as quoted by Akhavi, *op. cit.*, 153.

³⁷ *Man and Islam*, 33.

For, "Islam, by choosing the word *ummah*, has made intellectual responsibility and shared movement toward a common goal ... on the basis of its world-view and ideology, and for the realization of the divine destiny of man in the plan of creation."³⁸

Having stated that the best world-view is *tawhid*, the best ideology is Islam, and the best community is *ummah*, Shariati asserts that the best political model is Medina. To him, Medina during the Prophet's era is an ideal city, for it was there equality declared for all and social justice upheld³⁹ led by "the Prophet of liberty, justice and the people."⁴⁰

F. Concluding Remark

In the academic world, Shariati could be regarded as a spirited ideologue, so that he used allegorical language instead of scientific linguistic styles.⁴¹ Nevertheless, we could notice that scientifically, Shariati has successfully shaken the pillars of Western social knowledge, and forced their social scientists to reconsider and reexamine their basic assumptions.⁴² His thoughts also positively implied into the shocking development of the discourses of Islamic thought in the modern era.

Theoretically, in the views of some Shiite *ulama*, Shariati's thought

³⁸ *On the Sociology of Islam*, 119-20.

³⁹ "Shahadat", 158.

⁴⁰ "Shahadat", 191.

⁴¹ Abrahamian, *Ervand, Radical Islam: the Iranian Mojahedin*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1989, p. 110.

⁴² See Shariati, Ali, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, tr. R. Campbell, Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980.

could be regarded as no more than an incarnation of political syncretism distorting Islam. But for the other Shiite *ulama*, it is rightly believed as a pillar of Shiite revolutionary identity and that its side on attacking any kind of oppression is willingly celebrated.⁴³ This ambiguity of acceptance, so to speak, is because of Shariati's characteristics which is more syncretism in nature and brought implicitly anticlerical messages.⁴⁴ But we could say here that Islam is a religion for anybody, so that it is reasonable if Shariati brought Islam for all humans, especially for the oppressed. And that Shariati indeed hoped that the struggle for revolution is on the hands of the mass or the people (*al-nas*).⁴⁵ Here, then, Islam is not distorted, but expanded into the audience of the repressed. It is, actually, the translation of the God's statement that Islam is a mercy for all creatures (*rahmatan li al-alamin*) (QS. 21: 107).

In the actual world, Shariati showed that Muslim intellectuals could answer the challenge of time by proposing a new formula of Islam, a revolutionary Islam, wiping out the totalitarian regime as well as bringing the Muslim community back into the political liberty based on Islamic

principles. This new conceptual formula, in turn, illuminated socio-religious movement bearing the Islamic Revolution which successfully dethroned an authoritarian kingdom, and replaced by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Shariati has also demonstrated that Islam is able to be an outstanding efficacy of political ideology, superior to that Socialist-Communism and Liberal-Capitalism. To this, the Islamic Republic of Iran is the praxis example.

In its triumph of revolution, Iranian Muslims showed Shariati's formulation that the weak (*mustad'afin*) symbolized as Abel could win against the power of evil ruler symbolized as Cain. This confirms that political struggle between the power of secular ruler in the one hand and the social power in the other is not always that the ruled is defeated by the ruler.

The above explanation shows that an academician like Shariati could bear an intellectual movement. And this intellectual movement is a catalyst for the bigger political force. It explains that the position of intellectual movement is not a pure political movement, but merely a moral force and agent of social change. According to George Rude, a Sociologist, in his book *Ideology and Popular Protest* (1995), a socio-political movement or a revolution will only be succeeded if it is a kind of collaboration or a strong merger between "inherent ideology of the common people" and "radical ideologies of the intellectuals". Hence, in order that a socio-political movement is succeeded, "... the inherent ideology of the people had to be supplemented by a more structured radical ideology, and

⁴³ Schulze, Reinhard, *A Modern History of Islamic World*, London & New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000, p. 178.

⁴⁴ Algar, Hamid, "Ali Shari'ati," in Reeva S. Simon, Philip Mattar, and Richard W. Bulliet (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Modern Middle East*, New York: Macmillan, 1996, vol. 4, p. 1639.

⁴⁵ "Educated individuals may be good starters, but in terms of translating an ideology into reality and pushing it to completion, the masses have always been the practical and responsible elements." *Man and Islam*, 100.

therefore political possibilities depended heavily on the capacity of radical intellectuals to articulate their own aspirations and ideas in conjunction with those of the common people."⁴⁶

Finally, Shariati's thought followed by the victory of Islamic Revolution in Iran is a symbol of the triumph of Islamic political power against the power built by a secular regime, even though backed up by the Western power such as the United States of America.

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⁴⁶ Rude, George, *Ideology & Popular Protest*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995, p. xv.

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